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SPIRITUALITY AND COPING WITH MASTER'S
OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Stacey Lynn Chavez
September 2003

SPIRITUALITY AND COPING WITH MASTER'S
OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

A Project
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San Bernardino

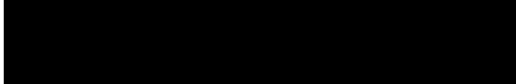
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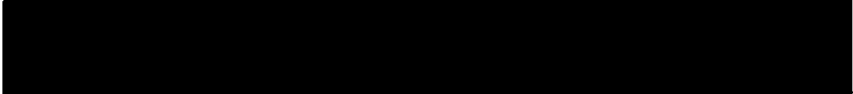
September 2003

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how Master's of Social Work students' utilized spirituality as an effective coping mechanism with the stress they faced while in the Master's of Social Work program. Twenty students participated in this study. A stress and spirituality scale was used to measure students' spirituality and perceived stress. Results showed that all students experienced more stress while in the MSW program. The majority of participants considered themselves to be spiritual or religious and engaged in some type of spiritual/religious activity which provided them with relief and comfort. Most students stated spirituality/religion was helpful in coping with the stress of the MSW program. In addition, spirituality was found to have a strong positive impact on a person's ability to cope with the stressors of the program. Drawing on the way students found meaning and purpose by engaging and utilizing their spirituality, they in turn can help their clients find meaning and purpose through their stressful situations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. McCaslin for your guidance and encouragement to think "outside of the box." I would also like to thank David for your support, and never ending faith in me. And lastly, thanks to my family for all your love throughout graduate school.

DEDICATION

To our clients who struggle to find meaning, peace, and
unconditional love amidst their stress.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The contents of Chapter One present an overview of the project. The problem statement and purpose of the study are discussed. Finally, the significance of the project for social work is presented.

Problem Statement

In a world where there is a wealth of stress, pain and suffering, individuals struggle to find meaning through it all. In light of the recent September 11 attacks, society seems to be reaching for spirituality as a coping mechanism to help with succeeding through difficult times. This event may have ignited a desire to connect with one another in shared concerns and propelled individuals to call upon their higher power for a sense of meaning and strength.

The clients that social workers help are on a quest for spirituality to help them succeed amidst their chaotic, challenging situations. Since spirituality is such a vital aspect of the individual, it must not be ignored; rather it must be valued as part of the whole person and incorporated into their treatment plan.

The current study examined how Masters of Social Work students utilize spirituality as a coping mechanism while in graduate school. In this particular study, spirituality was defined as a person's relationship with God or a higher power that promotes a sense of meaning, mission or purpose in life (Carroll as cited in Hodge, 2001). This definition included religious and nonreligious expressions of spirituality. Spirituality can also be viewed as a developmental process of making progress toward a sense of wholeness in oneself and with others (Canda, 1999).

As part of the research, an area that was looked at is how spirituality can affect one's ability to cope with stress and find meaning through one's difficult situations. Students in the Masters of Social Work Program are involved in an active process of developing their professional identity. They are learning how their spirituality plays a part in their coping with the demands of graduate school. Their experiences with spirituality and stress can expand their knowledge for assessing the spiritual side of their clients and further guiding them to use it as a strength. Self-understanding offers a basis for rapport with clients on their spiritual journeys.

MSW students experiences in graduate school may be pulling them into various stressful situations. They are

finding out first-hand how to deal with multiple stressors thrown their way, by balancing their personal lives, school, internships, and jobs. Like their clients, they are experiencing a lot of stress and may be using spirituality as a way to cope. They can draw from these experiences later and therefore be able to address the spiritual component of their clients lives and effectively help them utilize it to cope positively. In the exploration of how spirituality is used among MSW students, these students can learn to recognize how they use spirituality to cope with stress. In addition, they can better understand their clients' perspective and be able to start where they are.

The findings of the current study can help the social work profession improve how it addresses and supports individuals' spirituality. The research question is How do Masters of Social Work students utilize spirituality as a way to cope with the stress of graduate school?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to develop an improved understanding of how MSW students use spirituality as a way of coping with the demands of graduate school. By exploring the issue of stress and spirituality, social

workers can acknowledge the spiritual component of their clients. Practitioners can learn how their spirituality plays a part in coping with their own stressors and ultimately be able to help their clients implement it into a successful coping mechanism.

In the field of social work, there is a need to fully mature in the area of spiritual assessment (Hodge, 2001). Furthermore, spirituality may be a vital part of client lives and in response, demands more attention so it may be fully assessed and integrated as part of their care. This is why it is important to first explore how MSW students utilize spirituality to cope with stressors so one can better understand one's clients experiences and how spirituality plays a role in their lives.

For the purpose of this study, spirituality embraced both its religious and nonreligious expressions. Spirituality was defined as a person's relationship with God or a higher power that promotes meaning and purpose in life. In a national survey of social work practitioners, spirituality was frequently associated with the descriptors meaning, purpose, values, belief, and personal relationship with a higher power (Canda, 1999).

Social work is guided by distinct values, morals and a code of ethics. The strengths perspective and

empowerment are fundamental concepts in helping the client. For example if a social worker is going to help clients through stressful situations, it is extremely important to identify their strengths and try to empower them. It is important to help the clients identify and utilize their spirituality as a strength to help them cope. For example, a single mother might be experiencing a lot of stress, and she could be facing financial difficulty, however, her spirituality could play a crucial part by providing her with a sense of meaning and purpose. She would be encouraged to feel that even though she is faced with various stressors, she still has a sense of value and dignity, and feels hopeful about her situation. Social work values would offer her a sense of comfort. Spirituality would offer clients a source of hope and empowerment and support. It would give the person a sense of dignity and value, which leads back to the core values that the profession of social work upholds.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

Spirituality is an integral part of the human experience, encompassing nonreligious and religious forms. It must be completely explored through social work research, creating theories, and practice approaches

(Canda, 1999). Clearly there is not enough focus on the subject of spirituality in social work (Hodge, 2001). Spirituality can be considered a dimension of the human being along with the biological, psychological, and sociological dimensions. The spiritual component encourages experience and action to connect oneself with the world and symbolic reflection to therefore understand oneself and the world in which one lives (Canda, 1999). Since spirituality is an extremely valuable part of the client, it must not be ignored. Social workers must learn to help clients utilize it effectively.

This study would benefit the social work profession by shedding more light on the role spirituality plays in the midst of a demanding educational program. Since spirituality can act as a central part of the client's system, social workers need to learn to develop and implement client's utilization of spirituality as a way of coping. Within the social work profession, there is a movement to shed light on various ways spirituality affects individuals and society as a whole. Social workers, like other individuals, are dealing with spiritual matters in their personal lives. Many practitioners are aware of this and wish they had more

preparation for how to attend to these issues in practice (Canda, 1999).

If practitioners feel unqualified to address spirituality and religion in practice, turning one's head in the opposite direction will not suffice; rather, they should focus on the need for more education on the topic within social work programs and continuing education. Surveys of social work professors indicate that many recognize the significance of the topic but are not quite sure how to educate about it (Canda, 1999). This clearly shows that there remains a need for the social work profession to recognize spirituality in addition to the bio-psycho-social components of an individual and further be able to concretely help clients utilize it as a source of strength during difficult times. The social work profession needs further exploration when it comes to identifying and assessing the spirituality component of clients.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter Two consists of a discussion of the relevant literature. Specifically, spirituality can be an effective way of coping with stressors and hardships in one's life (Hodge, 2001). This section will discuss how utilizing spirituality can be correlated with adjusting to periods of increased stress.

Importance of Spirituality

There is a lack of knowledge in the area of spiritual assessment. Surveys have demonstrated that social workers have received minimal training in issues associated with spirituality or spiritual assessment (Hodge, 2001). It remains important to assess spirituality in this profession in order to be able to identify clients' strengths, including spirituality to aid in the helping process. As part of spiritual assessments, the most commonly used tools are quantitative measures or questionnaires (Hodge, 2001).

Hodge (2001) stated that, as noted by Furman and Chandy (1994), more than three-quarters of practitioners did not receive a lot of training regarding spirituality

during graduate school, even though it plays a significant role in many clients' lives. In recent years, spirituality has become an increasingly discussed topic within the social work profession. Assessing spirituality has sparked an interest among practitioners. Hodge points out that, as stated by Ellison and Levin (1998), hundreds of studies on spirituality and religion point to spirituality as an important strength in individual well being. This can also relate to client well being. Spirituality is defined as a connection with God, or something that is regarded to be a higher power that encourages a sense of meaning and purpose in one's life (Hodge, 2001).

Spirituality and Coping

Most people have some value and/or belief system that propels them through life. Approximately 90% of individuals that live in the U.S. have a belief in God (Graham, Furr, Flowers, & Burke, 2001). Given this, many clients may have spiritual beliefs that need to be addressed and supported by the social work profession.

In a study by Graham, Furr, Flowers, and Burke (2001) a relationship between religion, spirituality, and the capacity to cope with stress were examined. Graduate students in counseling were among the participants who

were part of this study. Participants who expressed spirituality through religious beliefs had better spiritual health and increased resistance to stressful circumstances than individuals who considered themselves as spiritual but not religious. Those that were struggling to comprehend the significance and the purpose of their stressors frequently sought direction from spirituality and religion (Graham et al., 2001). Graham et al. also stated that having a positive spiritual identity is essential for healthy development and life functioning. Individuals with a positive spiritual identity cope more efficiently on an interpersonal, emotional and spiritual level.

In regards to the relationship between counseling students' spiritual health and coping, a positive relationship was present. This implies that the stronger the individual's spiritual identity, the more effective their coping skills. Having a sense of one's own spirituality can positively affect coping through talking to a friend or speaking to a therapist in order to cope with stressful events (Graham et al., 2001). So, this study pointed towards spiritual health, which refers to having a strong sense of spirituality, playing a vital role in coping with stress.

Fabricatore, Handal, and Fenzel (2000) found that personal spirituality had a positive effect on the relationship between stressors and life satisfaction. Although individuals that hold a strong sense of spirituality may not feel any happier or any less depressed when faced with stressors, they appear to be able to maintain the cognitive aspect of their well being during stressful times.

Spirituality and Mental Illness

A study by Sullivan (1993) found that, among mentally ill individuals, having a strong belief in spirituality was recognized as important in being able to cope with their illness. Having the belief that there is a higher power put them a little more at ease when faced with the challenges of mental illness. It helps improve mental health by adding a type of support and encouragement to the individual. Spirituality may also help the individual find comfort and peace through the difficulties with which they are presented. In addition, a belief that one is not alone can enable an individual to find meaning in whatever they encounter.

Sullivan (1993) also found that sustaining a spiritual belief system is positively correlated with an

increased sense of well being and with using more effective coping strategies during stressful situations. Coping strategies that stem from self-efficacy, or that include a higher power as a source, are more effective in instilling a mentally ill client with hope and encouragement than simple deferring techniques, such as, "it's all in God's hands."

Along with effective, positive uses of spirituality, there are also negative, non-effective uses of spirituality. For example, a mentally ill patient can have grandiose delusions of being God or Jesus or carry out violent acts in the name of their higher power.

Spiritual Support

The concepts of death and loss are difficult for anyone to accept, especially with regards to children. The minimal research that has been done on spirituality and children's views on death has revealed that increased spirituality correlates with better adjustment (Nierenberg, 2001). Nierenberg stated that in families coping with a chronic illness or disability, spiritual and religious beliefs play a considerable role. Families coping with these types of stressors state they have increased levels of spiritual support, and report they

engage more frequently in religious activities. In addition, families who are more religious, report higher levels of adjustment.

Theory Guiding Conceptualization

One theory that guided this research project was Erikson's life stage theory (as cited in Rice, 1992). The developmental stage in which the person exists in life can affect how the person utilizes spirituality in coping with stress. So, the stage that MSW students are in affects how they utilize spirituality as a coping mechanism. Each stage presents certain challenges and tasks. Development at each stage results from the accomplishments of the prior stages. Challenges experienced at different stages may affect one's spirituality. At important life cycle transition points, such as marriage, birth, death, and retirement, individuals are more likely to contemplate issues of purpose and meaning.

When an individual experiences a lack of spiritual support and guidance during important life cycle events, this person will have more difficulty dealing with the challenges. However, when an individual has learned to utilize and access their strengths and spiritual support systems, they are more likely to have a healthy

self-esteem and handle crises with resiliency. For example, individuals in late adulthood, after the age of fifty, frequently have a keen sense of spiritual concern at this stage, because they have a necessity to create a sense that one's life has been meaningful and worthwhile.

Most likely, most MSW students are in the middle adult stage, facing the crisis of generativity versus self-absorption. Individuals at this stage strive to take care of and possess the virtue of caring. In addition, some MSW students are young adults and are facing the crisis of intimacy versus isolation. If negotiating is successful at this stage, intimacy can be experienced on a deeper level. Basic strengths at this stage are affiliation and love. Love of one's neighbor is a virtue that is present, which could motivate individuals to connect with a higher power and with one another. Individuals in their young adulthood take the burden of responsibility for their own commitments, beliefs, and attitudes seriously. The search for new meaning and deeper purpose emerges (Canda, 1999).

Summary

The literature important to the project was presented in Chapter Two. The literature review points towards how

using spirituality can affect an individual beneficially during stressful situations.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter Three documents the steps used in developing the project. Specifically, this section reviews the study design that included qualitative and quantitative methods. The sample is identified. The data collection, instruments, and procedures are discussed.

Study Design

The specific purpose of this study was to explore how Masters of Social Work students utilized spirituality as a way of effectively coping during school. This study explored how MSW students use spirituality to deal with the stressors they face while in graduate school.

The methods consisted of an exploratory, quantitative survey with a couple of open-ended questions. One of the concerns and limitations of this study was the availability of data, which included having enough participants.

Sampling

Participants in this study consisted of 20 individuals selected from random sampling of different cohorts of the MSW program, so the results may be

generalized to other MSW students. Surveys were placed in the mailboxes of MSW students located in the student lounge. A systematic random sample of fifty participants was used when placing surveys in the students' mailboxes. Fifty surveys were distributed in order to obtain twenty. Participants placed the completed surveys in a box titled "Chavez Survey," that was located in the student lounge.

This population was chosen since this study is exploring the utilization of spirituality as coping among developing social workers. The participants included married and non-married individuals. The participants consisted of both part-time and full-time students. Ages ranged from 22 years of age to 55 years of age.

Data Collection and Instruments

The information that was collected included demographics, i.e., age, student status, marital status, gender, ethnicity, income level, and spiritual/religious preference. Most were recorded at the nominal level. Age was continuous. Income level was recorded at the ordinal level. These demographics were investigated to see if they impact the strength of the correlation between spirituality and stress.

The dependent variable was identified as self-perceived stress. Stress was operationally defined as how these graduate students responded to the questions in a stress scale. The primary independent variable was spirituality, which was defined by how students responded to questions in a spirituality scale. The first section of the questionnaire included demographic and spirituality-related variables (see Appendix A). The questionnaire also included some two open-ended questions. The first one asked "How has your spirituality/religion provided you with comfort and support with the stress of the MSW program?" The second question asked "What type of spiritual/religious practices have you used or presently use to help you cope with the stress of the MSW program?"

The Revised Index of Core Spiritual Experience [INSPIRIT] (Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson as cited in Shahbaz, 2002) was a five-item scale that measured the independent variable, spirituality. Four-point ordinal scales were used for these questions. Two items identified the respondent's definition of God and experience that convinced a person God exists. Three items measured how strongly religious or spiritual the person felt.

The Revised Global Measure of Perceived Stress was a 10-item instrument that was used to measure this study's dependent variable, self-perceived stress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). A five-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to very often" assessed how often the respondent felt stressed in the last month. One item identified the respondents' stress level since they entered the MSW program.

Procedures

Fifty questionnaires were placed in the mailboxes of MSW students that were located in the student lounge, in order to obtain twenty completed questionnaires. This was done via systematic random sampling. Participants were given two weeks to submit the completed surveys. As described in the consent form, (see Appendix B) respondents were notified that the survey would take approximately fifteen minutes to complete. The completed surveys were returned to the box titled "Chavez Survey," that was located in the student lounge. Data was collected between February 24 and March 10, 2004.

Protection of Human Subjects

All data, surveys, and participants remained anonymous. The participants were told not to provide their

name. There were no identifying data in any of the measures, and a number was assigned to each survey. All surveys were kept in a secure manner. Study participants were asked to complete informed consent forms (see Appendix B) before they participated in the study by marking an "X." The participants were informed that they could stop at any time during the study.

A debriefing statement (see Appendix C) was distributed with the names of the researcher and the advisor. Participants were given the phone number to contact the research advisor, Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, if they had any questions regarding the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using univariate and bivariate statistics. Frequency distributions were run on the demographic data and other questions on the survey. Independent sample t-tests were performed to assess the stress and spirituality of various types of students. Qualitative data were analyzed to identify response categories.

Summary

Data were collected and analyzed with quantitative and qualitative approaches. The sample consisted of

approximately 20 participants in various cohorts of the Master's of Social Work program. Surveys were sent out in the forms of questionnaires that contained open ended, closed ended and Likert type scale questions. This study was exploratory research that examined how students used spirituality as a means of coping with different stressors while in graduate school.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter Four presents the results of this study. Important demographic and spirituality/stress-related factors were explained.

Presentation of the Findings

Univariate analysis was conducted to illustrate the most significant characteristics of the sample. Frequencies were established for the variables. Fifty percent of the participants were White, 40% were Hispanic, 5% Asian Pacific Islander, and 5% other. Ninety percent were females and 10% were males. Thirty-five percent were protestant, 25% catholic, 15% christian, 5% atheist, 5% non-denominational, 5% non-religious, and 10% seventh-day adventist. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 55, with an average age of 37 years. One-hundred percent of the participants stated their stress level increased since they were in the MSW program. Sixty percent stated their spirituality was somewhat helpful in coping with stress during the MSW program. Twenty-five percent said their spirituality was extremely helpful, 10% stated not helpful at all.

One open-ended question in the survey asked, "How has your spirituality/religion provided you with comfort and support with the stress of the MSW program?" The responses were characterized into two categories, spiritual and religious. Three people didn't answer this question. Religious responses from three participants stated they believed they could handle what God gives and trust God. Two participants answered they didn't feel alone in their struggle. Three said they believed in prayer and had church support. Among the spiritual responses, two said they had a sense of purpose. Three respondents stated they had faith in that everything would work out. Four individuals had a sense of meaning, support, encouragement, and peace.

Another open-ended question in the survey asked, "What type of spiritual/religious practices have you used or presently use to help you cope with the stress of the MSW program?" The responses were also characterized into spiritual and religious categories. Three people didn't answer this section at all. One person stated they didn't engage in any spiritual or religious activities. Another person responded not applicable. Twelve participants engaged in formal religious activities such as church, listening to Christian music, prayer, reading the bible,

faith on God, worship, praise and singing. Three people engaged in spiritual based activities. One individual took walks outside, another person took time for self, and one participant took one day at a time.

Twenty-five percent said they considered themselves to be strongly religious/spiritual. Forty percent said they were somewhat strong, 25% not very strong, and 10% not at all. Thirty-five percent said they spent once per week to several times per month on religious/spiritual practices. Thirty percent said they spent several times per day to several times per week. Twenty-five percent said they spent once per month to several times per year. Ten percent stated they spent once a year or less on religious/spiritual practices.

Forty percent stated they had felt very close to a spiritual force once or twice; twenty-five percent stated several times, 30% stated often, 5% did not answer. Forty-five percent stated they felt somewhat close to God. Thirty percent stated they felt extremely close, 25% not very close. In response to a question, "have you ever had an experience that has convinced you God exists," 75% stated yes, 20% said no, 5% did not answer.

Correlations among all variables were computed. Correlations were not significant regarding student

characteristics. The following correlations among variables were significant. Five spirituality variables were significantly inter-correlated: how helpful has your spirituality/religion been with helping you cope with stress during MSW program, how strongly religious/spiritual you consider yourself to be, how often do you spend time on religious/spiritual practices, how close do you feel to God, and have you ever had an experience that convinced you God exists (see Table 1).

Independent sample t-tests showed that whether participants had an experience that convinced them God exists differentiated students on several other religious items. Students who had an experience that convinced them God exists also spent more time on religious practices, felt closer to God, considered themselves more strongly religious/spiritual and were less likely to have felt close to a powerful, spiritual force (see Table 2).

Table 1. Correlations

	how helpful has your spirituality/religion been with helping you cope with stress during the MSW program	how strongly religious (or spiritually oriented) do you consider yourself to be	about how often do you spend time on religious or spiritual practices	how close do you feel to God	have you ever had an experience that has convinced you God exists
how helpful has your spirituality/religion been with helping you cope with stress during the MSW program					
Pearson Correlation		.838	.807	.727	.537
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.015
how strongly religious (or spiritually oriented) do you consider yourself to be					
Pearson Correlation			.918	.743	.465
Sig. (2-tailed)			.000	.000	.039
about how often do you spend time on religious or spiritual practices					
Pearson Correlation				.572	.662
Sig. (2-tailed)				.008	.001
how close do you feel to God					
Pearson Correlation					.279
Sig. (2-tailed)					.233
have you ever had an experience that has convinced you God exists					
Pearson Correlation					
Sig. (2-tailed)					

Table 2. Group Statistics and Independent Sample Test

have you ever had an experience that has convinced you God exists	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-test for Equality of Means		
				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
how helpful has your spirituality/religion been with helping you cope with stress during the MSW program						
yes	15	1.67	.488			
no	4	3.25	.957			
Equal variances assumed				-4.704	17	.000
Equal variances not assumed				-3.199	3.426	.041
about how often do you spend time on religious or spiritual practices						
yes	15	1.73	.704			
no	4	3.50	.577			
Equal variances assumed				-4.596	17	.000
Equal variances not assumed				-5.179	5.658	.002
how often have you felt as though you were very close to a powerful spiritual force						
yes	15	3.33	.900			
no	4	2.00	.000			
Equal variances assumed				2.902	17	.010
Equal variances not assumed				5.739	14.000	.000
how close do you feel to God						
yes	15	1.73	.594			
no	4	3.00	.000			
Equal variances assumed				-4.178	17	.001
Equal variances not assumed				-8.264	14.000	.000
how strongly religious (or spiritually oriented) do you consider yourself to be						
yes	15	1.87	.743			
no	4	3.50	.577			
Equal variances assumed				-4.050	17	.001
Equal variances not assumed				-4.712	5.987	.003

Summary

Chapter Four reviewed the results extracted from the project. Findings related to demographics, stress and spirituality were presented. Frequencies were presented from the different variables and the findings of the various correlations and t-tests were identified.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter Five discusses the results of this study. The limitations of the study are also presented. Further, the recommendations are discussed. In addition, the recommendations for social work practice and policy are presented. The Chapter concludes with a summary.

Discussion

Most of the participants were protestant, catholic or Christian and most were white females. Most students stated spirituality/religion was helpful in coping with the stress of the MSW program. This finding suggests that spirituality has a positive, strong impact on a person's ability to cope with stressors such as the MSW program.

The answers to the open-ended questions were characterized into both religious and spiritual categories. In response to "how has your spirituality/religion provided you with comfort and support with the stress of the MSW program," participants' answers included religious statements such as believing everything will work out, prayer, and going to church, and spiritual responses such as having a sense of meaning.

These responses show that individuals utilize various spiritual/religious beliefs that encourage and motivate them through various stressful situations and may add to their resiliency. This also suggests that it is important to recognize their various beliefs and continue encouraging their spirituality, so they can effectively cope with stress.

More than half of students stated that they engaged in religious type activities to help cope with stress of the MSW program. Among several activities were prayer, church, faith in God, and reading the bible. Some individuals engaged in spiritual type activities such as taking a walk, taking time for one's self and taking one day at a time. These findings show that once more, these individuals related to being spiritual vs. religious and it is vital to include both meanings. In addition, they engaged in the activities that reflected their beliefs. As a result, these activities may have strengthened their spirituality or religion. If these students use different spiritual/religious activities to cope, then this suggests that these developing social work professionals can learn to assess an individual's spirituality and help them utilize it as strength to help them cope effectively. Drawing on the way students found meaning and purpose by

engaging and utilizing their spirituality, they in turn can help their clients find meaning and purpose through their stressful situations.

The majority of participants stated they found themselves to be religious or spiritual. A few students spent one to several times a week to several times a month on spiritual/religious practices. Some individuals spent several times a day to several times a week on such practices. A large portion considered themselves close to God. Most of these students identified with being religious/spiritual, engaged in religious/spiritual practices at least once per week and felt close to God. These findings indicate this sample was biased towards most participants being religious.

There was a cluster of religious items that were intercorrelated. T-tests results included various items and the variable referring to having an experience that God existed had divided responses. An interesting finding indicated that most individuals who were religious were less likely to have felt close to a powerful spiritual force. This shows that religious individuals do not identify with such terms as, "powerful spiritual force." This particular phrase represents a spiritual type of language, almost a "new age" terminology that doesn't

coincide with their religious beliefs. In addition, the participants that acknowledged being religious reject being labeled spiritual and students that identified with being spiritual did not identify with being religious. This is why it is important to use inclusive language when referring to spiritual and religious so that one can work from the individual's beliefs and values. Subsequently, there needs to be inclusive language that involves spiritual and religious ways of thinking.

Limitations

It was hoped that 30 students would participate in this study; however, there were only 20. Therefore, not having sufficient participants may have skewed the results somewhat toward religious. There were two levels of bias, the geographical area in which the study took place is predominantly a conservative area and the participants were mostly religious. Consequently, this may clarify why most participants identified with a specific religion.

In the particular question that asked about spiritual/religious preference, several people wrote in Christian as their preference. Christian was not listed as an option and should have been a choice. One person wrote on the survey that there should have been a gay/lesbian

option on the marital part of the survey and they wrote in that they were gay. There should have been a gay/lesbian option to represent this particular population as well. Some of the language may not have been fully understood by some of the participants, for example using such wording such as "*powerful spiritual force*" may have led to some participants not answering accurately.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy

MSW programs should teach students to work from their clients' spirituality/religion rather than from their own beliefs. They should teach students to start where the clients are and not to impose their own views on others. For example, students should be taught that it is inappropriate to pray with their clients without first assessing the clients' spiritual or religious beliefs. As a result, students can honor the client's dignity and values, which are essential concepts that guide social work. Bearing this increased knowledge, graduate students will prove to be even more valuable because these types of social workers will help clients embrace their own spiritual natures and utilize them in the most positive manner. Since the participants identified with being religious or spiritual and each group rejected the other

term, it is necessary for social work graduate programs to teach the use of inclusive language when describing spirituality and religion.

Students stated they had a sense of meaning and purpose, believed that all would work out, had faith, and didn't feel alone when referring to how spirituality helped with the stress of the MSW program. These beliefs are key in sustaining the person through difficult, stressful times. Therefore it is important for MSW programs to incorporate specialized courses that instruct MSW students to assess their own spiritual/religious beliefs and those of others. Students can learn to address their own spirituality and examine how it has encouraged and motivated them through personal hardships. In the end, the virtues can ultimately be passed along to those who stand to benefit the most: the clients who look to professionals for guidance and support.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your student status?
☐ Part-time
☐ Full-time
2. How old are you? _____ years
3. What is your marital status?
☐ Never Married
☐ Married
☐ Divorced
☐ Widowed
4. What is your gender?
☐ Male
☐ Female
5. What is your ethnicity?
☐ White
☐ African American
☐ Hispanic
☐ Native American
☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
☐ Other (please specify) _____
6. What is your income level?
☐ 0-10,000
☐ 10,000-20,000
☐ 20,001-30,000
☐ 30,001-40,000
☐ 40,001-50,000
☐ 50,001 or more

7. What is your spiritual/religious preference?
- ☐ Protestant
 - ☐ Catholic
 - ☐ Buddhist
 - ☐ Muslim
 - ☐ Atheist/Agnostic
 - ☐ Jewish
 - ☐ Other (please specify) _____
8. How many hours a week do you work?
- ☐ 1-10
 - ☐ 11-20
 - ☐ 21-30
 - ☐ 31 or more
9. Has your stress level increased since you entered the MSW program?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ I do not know
10. How helpful has your spirituality/religion been with helping you cope with stress during the MSW program?
- ☐ Extremely helpful
 - ☐ Somewhat helpful
 - ☐ Not very helpful
 - ☐ Not helpful at all
 - ☐ Can't answer

11. How has your spirituality/religion provided you with comfort and support with the stress of the MSW program?
-
-
-
12. What type of spiritual/religious practices have you used or presently use to help you cope with the stress of the MSW program?
-
-
-
13. How strongly religious (or spiritually oriented) do you consider yourself to be?
- ☐ Strong
 - ☐ Somewhat strong
 - ☐ Not very strong
 - ☐ Not at all
 - ☐ Can't answer
14. About how often do you spend time on religious or spiritual practices?
- ☐ Several times per day-several times per week
 - ☐ Once per week-several times per month
 - ☐ Once per month-several times per year
 - ☐ Once a year or less
15. How often have you felt as though you were very close to a powerful spiritual force?
- ☐ Never
 - ☐ Once or twice
 - ☐ Several times
 - ☐ Often
 - ☐ Can't answer

*People have many different definitions of the "Higher Power" that we often call "God." Please use YOUR DEFINITION of God when answering these two questions.

16. How close do you feel to God?

- ☐ Extremely close
- ☐ Somewhat close
- ☐ Not very close
- ☐ I don't believe in God
- ☐ Can't answer

17. Have you ever had an experience that has convinced you God exists?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Can't answer

Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts **while in the MSW program**. In each case you will be asked to indicate by circling *how often* you felt or thought a certain way.

Perceived Stress Scale		NEVER	ALMOST NEVER	SOMETIMES	FAIRLY OFTEN	VERY OFTEN
1	In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	0	1	2	3	4
2	In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
3	In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?	0	1	2	3	4
4	In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	0	1	2	3	4
5	In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	0	1	2	3	4
6	In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	0	1	2	3	4
7	In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
8	In the last month, how often have you felt on top of things?	0	1	2	3	4
9	In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?	0	1	2	3	4
10	In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	0	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

CONSENT FORM

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to measure Master's of Social Work students' level of stress and its relationship with their utilization of spirituality as a coping mechanism. Stacey Chavez, a graduate student in Social Work, is conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Professor of Social Work at CSUSB. The Institutional Review Board, CSUSB, has approved this study.

In this study you will be asked several questions regarding stress and spirituality. The completion of the questionnaire should take approximately 15 minutes of your time and your answers will be kept strictly anonymous. You are not asked to provide your name. Your responses will therefore be anonymous and used only to examine how groups of people respond to the materials.

Please keep in mind that your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to stop at any time.

Please return the survey to the social work student lounge. Simply place it in the big box with the sign stating "Chavez Survey." Thank you for your time and patience.

Please check: I have read the above descriptions and understand the study's nature and purpose and I agree to participate.

PLEASE MARK WITH "X": _____ DATE: _____

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for participating in this study. The study was designed to explore stress and utilization of spirituality among MSW students. Your participation and contribution to this study is greatly appreciated. Any questions regarding this study can be directed to Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, (909) 880-5507.

The questions asked in this study are of personal nature and some participants may have found them to be upsetting. If you feel the need to talk about any emotions or concerns that may have arisen during your participation you may contact the CSUSB Counseling Center at (909) 880-5040.

If you are interested in the results of this study, copies will be available in the PFAU Library after Summer 2004.

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